



Tell Me a Story

[by J. Murray Elwood]

Accomplishment storytelling appeals to the interviewer's imagination and is a powerful way to market skills when interviewing.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, lawyer and legal consultant Brian Howard was asked to address a group of Washington attorneys on a very sensitive subject - the quality of life in law firms. Mr. Howard spoke for about half an hour, concluding his presentation with a quotation from T. S. Eliot's poignant reflection on human relationships, *The Cocktail Party*. He then opened the floor to questions, expecting the audience to challenge his views.

Imagine his surprise when a lawyer in the back of the room stood up, and with tears in his eyes, said that in all his years of attending legal meetings, Mr. Howard's presentation was the finest talk he had ever heard. Howard appreciated the compliment, but was mostly amused that poetry had somehow found a sensitive spot in the armor of a hard-nosed D.C. litigator.

Over lunch a few weeks later, Howard laughingly related the incident to a hiring partner of a major law firm. The lawyer appreciated the humor of the anecdote, but was also impressed by the presentation abilities that the story revealed. A few weeks later, the partner called Howard and offered him a position as Director of Marketing with his firm. Howard appreciated the compliment, but declined the offer.

Storytelling is as old as the Stone Age and as current as Garrison Keillor. We are always telling each other stories, whether at the office copier, over late Friday afternoon drinks, or around the supper table at day's end. Storytelling can also be a powerful tool during a self-marketing meeting or when interviewing with prospective employers.

During an interview, it just isn't enough to say that you are particularly skilled in this or that area of the law and let it go at that. Not enough, for example, to assert that you provide direction and oversee your firm's litigation department, or that in your law office you are considered the expert on the Americans with Disabilities Act. Period. You must also paint a picture; you must demonstrate your skills by telling stories that flesh out the picture.

When you use anecdotes at an information-gathering session, or a job interview, you can capture your listener's attention, clothe the bare bones of your résumé with flesh and blood, and illustrate your abilities clearly and graphically. Accomplishment stories turn a drab recitation of facts into a compelling narrative and make you memorable as a candidate.

Why is it that sharing stories is such a wonderful vehicle of human communication? Sociologist Andrew Greeley, in his memoir, *Furthermore*, says that storytelling is so powerful because it short-circuits dull, factual discourse. Storytelling makes a leap from the imagination of the storyteller to the imagination of the listener, from the memory of the presenter to the memory of the hearer, from his life to the lives of his audience, from his stories to their stories.

Sadly, storytelling during a job search has become something of a lost art. Self-marketing meetings and job interviews all too often degenerate into a boring game of "20 Questions," or a tedious recitation of the chronology of a person's work history. While many

job seekers possess attractive resumes, know how to dress for success, and have well-rehearsed answers to tricky interview questions, few are skilled at marketing themselves using accomplishment storytelling techniques.

It is easy to weave stories into the dynamics of your self-marketing meetings and job interviews. This chapter will show you how.

Telling Your Story

Step One - Identify Your Accomplishments.

Try to bring to mind large and small accomplishments in your career history that you may have overlooked or discounted. Recall contributions you have made to former clients and employers. This remembering will provide you with information you can include on your resume. It will help you showcase the critical skills you can offer your next legal employer. It will serve as a blueprint for future interviews.

Here is an excellent exercise that will help you prepare a repertoire of stories to illustrate your particular assortment of legal skills. Read down this list of typical legal accomplishment areas, jot down a few illustrations if a particular category applies to your experience, and add any other successes that may be unique to your career history:

Your Achievements

Did you bring in new clients, suggest ways to develop your firm's business base, or market the firm or yourself in some creative way?



Did your job performance (e.g., billable hours) exceed expectations?

Have you received a recent favorable performance review?

Were you ever commended, even informally, by anyone in your firm for an outstanding performance?

Do members of your firm generally regard you as possessing particular legal or business abilities, e.g., negotiation, marketing, “rain-making” skills?

Did you win an unusually large jury award or insurance settlement?

Did you successfully settle any long-standing cases?

Have you received any awards or compliments for particular successes?

Do you have a reputation for being able to deal effectively with certain difficult legal areas, situations, or people?

Did you initiate new office systems or streamline the ways and costs of doing business?

Are you regarded as the firm’s unofficial high tech expert?

Did you design or implement new filing procedures or management information systems?

Do you manage or supervise other lawyers? Mentor new associates or train paralegals?

Have you handled any international matters?

Were you ever asked to deal with any special case or client?

Did you ever handle a crisis gracefully, successfully?

Did you troubleshoot and resolve a difficult

problem?

Are you an adjunct instructor in law school or teach in a local adult education program on some particular area of your legal expertise?

Have you made a significant pro bono contribution of your time and talents?

Have you written an article for a law journal or newspaper?

Step Two - Use a Story Format To Frame Your Accomplishments

The internal structure of an accomplishment story is usually made up of these three elements:

Situation --> Action --> Results

1) The Situation. Paint a brief word picture of the challenge or problem that you or your firm faced. This is the way that Brent Janski, a corporate lawyer, would describe how he initiated new cost-cutting systems and procedures:

Upon assuming my new position at Tertellian Technologies, I ascertained that corporate expenditures for outside counsel were running about 40 percent higher than the costs of comparable in-house legal departments . . .

2) The Action. Then tell what concrete steps you took to address the situation or solve the problem:

. . . As Assistant General Counsel, I designed and implemented a global tracking system for better cost control and more accurate budgeting purposes . . .

3) The Results. Describe how your efforts successfully completed the task or overcame the challenge. If possible, quantify your results, using numbers or percentages to demonstrate the success of your actions,

. . . As a result, these efforts brought about

a greater visibility of legal and transactional costs and yearly savings of approximately \$1.2 million to the company.

Another example:

Situation In a period of economic downturn and declining firm revenues . . .

Action . . . *I addressed the issue of firm marketing, obtained the services of an outside consultant, and initiated a comprehensive program of new client recruitment by an on-site marketing training sessions designed to raise the level of accountability for business development on the part of every member of our firm . . .*

Results . . . *Because of these efforts, our firm acquired several major new clients within the following six months, including a Fortune 500 mortgage company, representing significant revenues and receivables of over \$130 million.*

An extended example: This accomplishment story illustrates all the narrative elements as a comprehensive whole. Let’s say that a Seattle lawyer would like to transfer her legal skills into an executive position with a non-profit agency. So when interviewing, she uses one of her pro bono activities to illustrate, not only her many contacts within the local community, but her marketing abilities:

At a time of economic growth, community participation in the Greater Seattle Battered Women’s Shelter annual fund-raising events was experiencing an inexplicable decline. As Chair of the Year 2001 Shelter Committee, I personally recruited other University of Oregon law alumni within the Seattle business community to publicize and support the Shelter’s annual Association Ball. I also appeared on several local television and radio talk shows to explain the group’s activities, designed a press information kit, and obtained extensive regional print-media coverage. Because of these efforts, I was able to improve community participation in the Association’s

fund-raising undertakings by approximately 23 percent over the previous year.

Step Three - Weave Your Stories into the Conversational Flow

Practice your career anecdotes so that you deliver them informally and naturally. Try to have about five anecdotes available for your interviews. Listen carefully when interviewing to the flow of the conversation. Many law interviewers like to talk about themselves and their successes. Nod affirmatively and wait for conversational commonalities, and then begin your anecdote by saying: "I know exactly what you're talking about . . ." or "I've had a similar experience, for example . . ."

Watch your language. Speak confidently when relating your career successes. Do not short-circuit your interview with language that dilutes your stories' effectiveness. One legal job seeker had the habit of qualifying just about every one of his accomplishments with the word "fairly." He was "fairly good at deposing witnesses," "fairly good at writing briefs," and so on. As a result, he had a difficult time finding a new position, as interviewers came away with the distinct impression that he was only a "fairly good" candidate.

Remember that the person interviewing you, like every other human being, enjoys hearing a good anecdote. Tell them an entertaining story during a self-marketing meeting and they'll remember you. Tell them an accomplishment anecdote during a job interview, and they may tell you that you are hired!